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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [UNSC](#) [PBTS](#) [PINR](#) [KPAL](#) [LE](#) [SY](#)  
SUBJECT: HARIRI'S DAMASCUS VISIT HERALDS NEW "PERSONAL  
RELATIONSHIP"

REF: A. BEIRUT 1334  
[1](#)B. BEIRUT 1318

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons  
1.4 (b) and (d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Prior to his December 19-20 visit to Damascus, Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri told the Ambassador that he "must go to Damascus to better relations," and he cast the visit as "a new form of achieving sovereignty and independence." Following the visit, the PM's chief of staff Nader Hariri emphasized to us on December 24 that the trip was a necessary adaptation to changing regional and international dynamics. The Syrians, he reported, were "comforting" and Syrian President Bashar al-Asad sought to establish a "personal relationship" with the PM. Hariri said that the PM "heard all the right things" from al-Asad, whom he described as seeking a new paradigm based on economic cooperation, not ideological conflict, on the model of Syria's blossoming relationship with Turkey. The two sides reportedly discussed all outstanding issues, and al-Asad promised cooperation on the issues of Palestinian arms and border demarcation. The prevailing mood in Hariri's camp is relief, although they remain suspicious that the Syrians will deliver on their promises. End summary.

PREVIEW OF DAMASCUS VISIT  
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[1](#)2. (C) PM Hariri hinted in a December 18 meeting with the Ambassador and visiting SEMEP Special Coordinator for Regional Affairs Frederic Hof that he would visit Syria over the weekend since he "must go to Damascus to better relations." His visit -- like his participation in a national unity government -- would not signal abandonment of the principles of the March 14 movement, but rather "a new form of achieving sovereignty and independence," he explained. Principles such as support for the Lebanese Armed Forces, economic goals, and the Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) were "non-negotiable," Hariri insisted. In response to the summons of several of his key advisors issued by a Syrian court (ref B), Hariri said those named would not travel since he didn't "want to give the impression that al-Asad is protecting my team." Even so, Hariri revealed that he was attempting to convince al-Asad that the summons issue was "ridiculous" via official Turkish and Saudi intermediaries. As for future travel, Hariri detailed plans to visit a wide range of Arab countries and global powers before accepting an Iranian invitation to Tehran (PM Hariri has scheduled a trip

to Paris the week of January 21, with a possible follow-on to Davos.)

#### POST-VISIT: HOPES AND SUSPICION

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13. (C) On December 24, acting DCM met with the PM's chief of staff Nader Hariri to obtain a debrief of the December 19-20 Damascus visit. The PM's trip, Hariri said, must be viewed as a necessary adaptation to changing regional and international dynamics. Hariri, who was the only advisor to accompany the PM, emphasized the Syrians' "going out of their way to be comforting" and Syrian President Bashar al-Asad's desire to establish a "personal relationship" with the PM without relying on intermediaries or message-bearers, as was common historically in Syrian-Lebanese relations. The goal of the visit, he underscored, was to build confidence between the two, and the nine hours of meetings -- including four one-on-one meetings -- was evidence of success. The PM stayed overnight for two reasons, Nader Hariri claimed: to take the time to develop the relationship and to "make sure" to give a press conference from the Lebanese embassy in Damascus. The press conference was not originally on the schedule, and Hariri claimed that al-Asad encouraged the PM to proceed when he broached the topic after some time. Hariri emphasized that the PM did not meet with any Syrian security officials during the visit.

14. (C) As for the substance of the visit, Hariri said that "all outstanding issues" were raised, including border demarcation, Palestinian arms outside the camps, the future of the Syrian-Lebanese Higher Council, Hizballah, the STL,

and regional relationships. Hariri said that the PM was comforted because he "heard all the right things" from al-Asad. Hariri claimed to feel "a new mindset" during the visit, which he summed up in al-Asad's statement that "it is time to focus on the economy, not ideology." Syria saw its blossoming relationship with Turkey as a model for the benefits of a regularized relationship with Lebanon, Hariri postulated, although he emphasized that "we want to see deliverables."

15. (C) On specific issues of concern, Hariri reported that the PM told al-Asad that there would be "no compromise on the STL." He also said that both sides agreed that the issue of borders should be addressed immediately and that al-Asad followed-up with a call on December 23 to inform the PM that the Syrian border team was ready to begin work, starting in the north. On Palestinian arms, Hariri claimed that al-Asad had urged the Lebanese cabinet to take a decision that he would then "facilitate." Hariri relayed that the PM told al-Asad that he would maintain his current alliances and that al-Asad did not object. When the PM raised the issue of Hizballah, Hariri reported, al-Asad responded that "the Iranians have a project in the region and the Arabs need one, too," a statement that Hariri interpreted as evidence of al-Asad's desire for the Saudi Arab unity project to succeed. All promises aside, Hariri judged, "Bashar is still Bashar, and we have no illusions."

16. (C) Comment: Lebanese attitudes toward the visit have been muted since it was long considered a key deliverable in the Syrian-Saudi rapprochement. While some of Hariri's allies complained that he did not take an official ministerial delegation with him, he has responded that the visit was personal and an official ministerial exchange will follow. The prevailing mood in Hariri's camp is relief that the trip went off without a hitch and pleasure about al-Asad's promises, although they remain suspicious that the Syrians will deliver.

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